

Issues of Madhesh

Political, social, economic and cultural issues of Madhesh



Issues identified by the non-political leaders of Madhesh.



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Prepared and edited by: Rakesh Ranjan

Layout and cover design: Navin Shekhar Karna

District-level Workshops facilitated by: Brikhesh Chanda Lal, Sibendra Lal Karna

Publisher:

SUPPORT Nepal

PO Box 41

Janakpurdham, Dhanusha, Nepal

Tel: +977-41-527 204, 521 486

Fax: +977-41-526 036

E-mail: snp@ntc.net.np

Web: <http://www.supportnepal.org>

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Executive Summary

Madhesis, an indigenous population located in the Tarai region bordering India, constitute about 40% of the population in Nepal and have been historically marginalized from the political, economic and social sectors of the country. The recent Tarai uprising in January 2007 has highlighted the increasing disenchantment of the population with the ongoing political transition. If left unaddressed, this could potentially derail the current peace process. As different agitating groups in the Madhesh are not politically organized under one umbrella and leadership, there is a need for dialogue on the major demands of the Madheshi people including Madheshi activists, local leaders, media and civil society members.

To address this gap, SUPPORT Nepal has recently (10-22 May, 2007) conducted district level workshops in 7 Tarai districts (Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rauthat, Bara and Parsa) of southern Nepal aimed at strengthening a common Madheshi platform through local-level dialogues in the Tarai by mobilizing a wider segment of the Madheshi society to participate positively in the political transition. The workshop was a non-political platform for local Madheshi leaders. That platform and the outcomes of the local dialogues will be utilized at the central level to pressure the government talk teams to address issues in the Madhesh and address gaps in information on Madheshi issues at a central level.

The 350 participants of the 7 district level workshops were focusing on identifying the issues of Madhesh in four broad categories; political, social, economic and cultural. The participants also spent a considerable amount of time analyzing existing political, social, economic and cultural aspects and trends before identifying the issues. They also discussed the challenges to addressing the issues of the Madhesh. This publication is the collection of voices/ issues identified by non-political Madheshi leaders of seven districts of Nepal.

This publication is aimed at giving a clearer picture of people's aspirations/ demands in Madhesh and is expected to contribute to meaningful and pro-people dialogue on Madhesh between the government "Talk Team" and the agitating parties of Madhesh. This publication should also be helpful for policy makers, planners and the field workers working on/for the Madhesh.



Ganga Pd. Sah
President
SUPPORT Nepal

MADHESH An Overview

There are two geographical definitions in Nepal; one that extends to a trans-national region, the other specifically limited to Nepal. The first and more general definition includes the long and narrow strip of plains abutting the Himalayan foothills all the way from Uttar Pradesh through Nepal, West Bengal, and Bhutan and into India's North East Frontier Agency, now called Arunachal Pradesh. The second definition, includes only the plains region adjacent to the foothills within Nepal's national boundaries. This foothill is called the Siwaliks or sometimes Churia range.



Madhesh does not cover all parts of Tarai districts; it excludes Siwalik and mid mountain areas.

Etymologically, Madhesh has been claimed to be derived from the Sanskrit word “Madhyadesh” (mid country) which extends from the foothills of the Himalayan region in the north to the Vidhyachal Parbat in the south situated in central India.

In 1963, the government established 75 districts in the country and the previously 17 districts in Tarai were restructured into 20 districts which also included part of Siwalik range and hill areas. The Tarai in Nepal is approximately 885 km long, from its western boundary, the Mahakali River, to its eastern boundary, the Mechi River while its average width along its east-west axis is only 26 km varying from 4 km to 52 km. The estimated average width of the Tarai along its entire east-west axis is 32 kms.

According to the National Census of 2001, 48.4% of the country's total population of 23.2 million lived in Tarai districts with a density of 329 persons/sq km. 15.6% of the country's total land is in the Tarai plain and *Vitri Madhesh*.

Two geographical terms frequently are used in Nepal; “Inner Tarai” and “Outer Tarai.” The three broad, low-lying river valleys north of the Siwaliks are referred to as *Vitri Madhesh*. The “Outer Tarai” is the plains region within Nepal's border south of the Siwaliks.

Madheshi are the non-hill origin people who speak plains languages such as *Maithili, Bhojpuri, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali* and *Awadhi* and dialects of these languages basically used by *Janjati* indigenous groups. The Madheshi community is composed of the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy such as *Brahmin,*

Kshatriya, Baisya and *Dalits*, indigenous *Janjati* ethnic groups, and other native tribes and Muslims. According to the National Census of 2001, 59 castes and ethnic groups are identified in Madhesh.

Baisya, Yadav and other Hindu caste group share 44.3% of the total Madheshi population followed by Indigenous (27.5%), Muslims (13.2%) and Dalits (11.9%).

The 20 Tarai districts have in total 1.414 million ha of arable land; 87.3% of the total arable land in Nepal is in Madhesh region; and the remaining 12.7% in hills. Arable land covers 53.5% of the Madhesh region while only about 16% of hills in the Madhesh region are cultivated. This unbalanced arable land distribution could exert more pressure on Madhesh region for farmland resources. (*ISRSC.2004*)

There is unbalanced forest distribution in Madhesh region; only about 21% of the Madhesh region is forested compared to about 80% in hill areas of the 20 Tarai districts. People in Madhesh region have very little access to forest resources, and a major part of the forests are located in national parks and wildlife reserves, which are not available for peoples' use.

Overpopulation, agricultural and economic deterioration, famine and other reasons pushed the hill people of both Hindu castes and indigenous *Janjati* groups to migrate into Madhesh region. Better economic opportunities, abundant land and the malaria eradication program launched by the state encouraged migration into Madhesh. In addition, the state also encouraged migration to Madhesh involuntarily.

Population of Madheshi Community in 20 Tarai districts ('000)

Year	Hill people	Madheshi people
1952/54	142 (6%)	2,246 (94%)
1981	2,795 (43%)	3,762 (57%)
2001	4,120 (37%)	7,092 (63%)

Gurung, H. (1998). Social Demography % Expressions. KTM. 1998. National Census 2001.



According to National Census of 2001, Hindus represent 80.6% of the total population in Nepal. Madhesh is also well dominated by Hindu and caste as a system of social organization is peculiar to Hindu societies.

Madheshi Movement

as perceived by the participants

When the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) signed a landmark deal on November 21, 2006, Nepalese people hoped that the decade-long armed conflict had come to an end and that it was time to focus on, not only structuring the political system and strategizing elections, but also addressing the plight of ordinary citizens in need of basic services such as food, shelter and water.

The seemingly dusky lights on the horizons, however, remain extremely dim. Immediately on the ground the political leaders in Kathmandu had to grapple with issues of profound political concerns; how to adequately address the Madheshi concern within a democratic framework? That question is compounded by the fact that there was a certain amount of confusion and mystery regarding the causes and motivations of the new revolt in the southern part of the country.

In Lahan, a town in the Siraha district, locals defied curfew imposed after a group of Maoists on January 19th killed Ramesh Mahato, a 16 year-old school boy, who was part of the protest organized by Madheshi People's Rights Forum (MPRF). Mahato was from the Madheshi community. The conflict started after the Maoists violated a transportation strike called by MPRF.

The Lahan incident triggered a wider crisis. A total of 27 (officially) to 38 (unofficially) people were killed in the unrest from January 19th to February 7th 2007. After Lahan, many Tarai towns witnessed curfews, strikes, and widespread vandalism of public and private property. Although initiated by MPRF, the Madheshi Movement was led by representatives of multi-party, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-castes, and multi-geographical groups. They all demanded equal treatment regarding issues such as caste, religion, and any social, political, economic values.

In addition to the Madheshi ethnic groups, other groups such janjati had also been supporting and expressing their solidarity with this movement and were asking government to fulfill their demands.



Demonstrators of Madheshi Movement with broom in Janakpurdam.

Within the 3 weeks of the massive demonstration and protest, people were killed; factories and markets closed; plenty of people badly wounded; a few hundreds arrested; and a few billion Nepali Rupees of properties destroyed and millions of Nepali Rupees in financial losses. The situation was worsening and turning into armed violence, which was far worse. People's lives were in danger and nation was preparing for ethnic and political explosion. There were no proper observance of human rights, free press, law and order. Many local political parties, human rights organizations, and civil society leaders were expressing their public opinion in favor of the movement. However, the state and members of the eight party government were not being attentive and rather blamed the Madheshi movement on "pro-palace" agitators, "forces Hindu fundamentalist elements" and "communal violence."



*"I will pay
Rs. 1,000,000.00 if you
let me kill your brother."*
Elder brother of Ramesh
Mahato who died in
Lahan incident to the
government official who
offered a government's
compensation package
of Rs. 1,000,000.00.

The major political demands of the movement were the establishment of a federal system of governance and regional autonomy with rights to self-determination; proportional representation in the Constituent Assembly; representation of Madheshi population in policy making during the transitional period; provision of citizenship; end to discrimination in hiring Madheshi in the national administration, army and bureaucracy; and compensation to Madheshi martyrs.

The government response to the Madheshi demands remained slow and ambivalent in the beginning. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala promised the Constituent Assembly elections slated for mid-June 2007 would address the Madheshi demands. On February 7, 2007, PM Koirala made a second address to the nation again, announcing that the eight parties will go for federal system of governance, increase electoral constituencies based on population growth and increase the number of seats to be held on the basis of proportional representation. An amendment of the interim Constitution was finally passed to represent a fair share of Tarain in the New Nepal.

After three weeks of burnt-out buses, shattered glass, blaring curfew orders, jittery looking security forces, burning tyres, trees felled across the highway and angry demonstrators, schools and colleges reopened and businesses resumed in the affected region. From February 9, 2007 traffic was back on the roads. However, talks with government continue and violence and tensions continue in many Tarai districts.

Issues of Madhesh

as identified by the participants

Nepal has become an unequal society in which some people or communities and geographical areas have prospered while many other communities and districts have not. There is a strong conceptual debate around the notion that exclusions, either social, economic, political, cultural or geographical have been the main causes of unequal society. Exclusion results in poverty, unequal distribution of resources and development initiatives, and in the inability of certain communities or geographical areas to participate in socio-economic and political development processes.

The Madheshi issue is as old as the emergence of Nepal's democratic movement in 1950s. The major grievance of that time was the imposition of Nepali language as medium of education. In the mid-1970s and 80s, the issues of citizenship and 'work permit' were the major problems for the Madheshi. For the last fifty years, Madheshi have been raising their voice against alleged 'discrimination' by the state, yet their problems remained unsolved.

It could be said that more than 238 years of exclusion of a majority of people is the main reason of social conflict in the country. The Madheshi communities while have a long history of living in Nepal but have practically considered outsiders and have been marginalized and excluded from the decision-making and policy planning process. Moreover, they face serious problems, i.e. of their true identity in their own native land. The Madheshi feel highly discriminated against and have almost lost "the sense of belonging to this nation."

As said by Dr. Harka Gurung in his article on *Trident and Thunderbold; Culture Dynamics in Nepalese Politics*, "Basically, there are three main social groups in Nepal that have been marginalized by the state's monopolistic policy. They are Janjati (ethnic groups) on the basis of culture, the Dalits (untouchables) on the basis of caste, and the Madheshi (Tarai) on the basis of geography."



Identifying issues?
Participants in group discussion.

About 45% of the 20 Tarai districts have the worst poverty rankings and only 25% are ranked as 'best' compared to districts in hills and mountains where 35% are ranked as 'best' and 29% are ranked as 'worst'. The Tarai districts, having good access to transportation marketing systems, cultivated land, and rich natural resources are endowed in their rankings. Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi and Rauthat districts, where about 78-94% of the total populations is Madheshi, are ranked as having worst poverty cases; the poverty ranking index ranges from the lowest 4 in Rauthat to 13 in Sarlahi district. The poverty level is reported to be very low in Jhapa, Chitwan and Morang where majority of the people are of hill origin. (*Sharma and Shah [2002], ICIMOD [1997]*)



Women can speak if men can listen?

Similarly, about 90% of the Tarai districts have a large number of educationally deprived populations compared to only 13% in hills and mountain districts. Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rauthat and Bardiya have the largest number of educationally deprived people. 50% of the Tarai districts have 'worst ranking' for child literacy rates compared to 29% in hills and mountain districts. Rauthat, Sarlahi and Mahottari are the worst in child literacy index values. Again 40% of Tarai districts have lower overall literacy rates compared to 31% in hill districts. (*Sharma and Shah [2002]- New Era, ICIMOD [1997]*)

Issue # 1 End of Exclusion

There should be an end to all types of exclusion. Madheshi should have fair and just representation in all social activities ranging from grass root to central level.

Issue # 2 Gender and Caste based Discrimination

Discrimination against women should end. Women should have equal opportunity in social development starting with the family. Similarly, caste-based discrimination should also be ended.

Issue # 3 Awareness against evil social practices

Those social practices which have negative impact on Madhesh should be eliminated. Awareness against these evils should be raised at rural Madhesh. For instance, untouchability.

Issue # 4 End of Child labor, child marriage and dowry

Child labor and child marriage should be banned. There should be income generating opportunities for poor parents to end child labor. There should be a social campaign against dowry.

Issue # 5 Practical, scientific and free education

Every child should have access to free education. Education should be practical and scientific.

Issue # 6 Identification and harmony among diversity

There should be harmony among various castes and ethnic groups in Madhesh. All are equal and there is no so-called “forward” and “backward”. All local languages in Madhesh should be respected and different identification should be acknowledged.

Issue # 7 End of migration from hill

Uncontrolled and voluntary migration from hill to Madhesh should be controlled. If it is done, then migration from Madhesh to hill should be encouraged in order to maintain integration and balance among Madheshi and hill-origin people.

Issue # 8 End of Impunity

Impunity must be ended. Perpetrators should be punished irrespective of his/her affiliation and position.

Issue # 9 Women rights

Rights of Madheshi women should be protected and promoted. Rural Madheshi women should be trained and mobilized for protecting and promoting Madheshi women rights.

Issue # 10 Sustainable development of Madhesh

A program should be designed and implemented for the sustainable development of Madhesh. Pro-people approach should be adopted while designing and implementing development project in Madhesh.



Every child should have access to free education and child marriage should be banned.



*If we need to declare
'republic' before CA poll,
then we prefer to go for
referendum.*

In the two houses of parliament composed after the 1991 election, Brahmins held 38.1% of the seats and Newars 8.3%, the highest proportion in all four legislatures. Similarly, these groups continued to retain their numbers even in the election of 1999 where Brahmins and Newars held 39.6% and 8.3% respectively. Brahmins, Chhetri and Newar dominated the seats in combined upper and lower houses of parliament constituting 65.2% of seats while they represent 36% of the population. On the other hand, the Madhesh community constituted only 17.4% of seats while representing 32.0% of population. Thus, one finds a serious imbalance in the representation of the various communities in the so-called national legislature, which is the law-making body.

The structure in the political parties is mostly centralized and is largely non-inclusive. Again, the major leaders in any political party are the hill Brahmins and Chhetris and normally the Madheshi people are discriminated against in most actions. The Central Committee of any political party is vital for formulating policies and the members make collective decisions for important action. Nepali Congress and the UML are the major democratic parties in the country but they have included only a few Madheshi as members in their Central Committees, respectively 3 and 4 Madheshi. Again, representation of Madheshi politicians in both Upper House and Lower House is considerably low, respectively 41 in Lower House and 6 in Upper House. (*Parliament Secretariat Records, Singh Darbar, 1999.*)

Issue # 1 Constituencies based on scientific census

Census should be done on a scientific basis before declaring the electoral constituencies as the population of Madhesh has been increased compared to the census of 2001.

Issue # 2 Federal State/ System

Establishment of federal system of governance and regional autonomy with rights to self-determination.

Issue # 3 People's Republic

Either there should be political will with commitment for conducting Constituent Assembly (CA) poll in free and fair manner or declaration of republic from referendum.

Issue # 4 Proportional representation at each of the organs of the state

There should be provision of proportional representation of Madheshi at each of the organs of the state, i.e. legislative, judiciary and executive bodies.

Issue # 5 Representation of all excluded groups of Madhesh in constituent assembly

There should be guarantee for representation of all excluded groups of Madhesh in constituent assembly.

Issue # 6 Reservation

There should be a reservation for the poor and excluded groups of Madhesh in education, employment, promotion and other activities of the state.

Issue # 7 Proportional electoral system

Proportional electoral system should be declared.

Issue # 8 Reservation for women

33 percent reservation should be done for Madheshi women in CA poll.

Issue # 9 Representation based on caste

For those minority groups whose population is less, their representation should be based on caste.



Women's representation in Constituent Assembly election should be guaranteed..



Revenue generated from Madhesh should be utilized for the development of least-developed Madheshi districts.

The Madheshi community shares 32% of the country's total human resources, but its exclusion from the national mainstream has been one of the negative factors hindering the sound economic development of this country. Socio-political and economic inclusion of Madhesh, generally considered as the 'bread basket' of the nation and the major source of revenue generation, including Madheshi people, is what the country requires for building a more inclusive nation based on democratic norms and processes.

Three castes/ethnic groups; namely Brahmins, Chhetri and Newars have dominated the civil service in Nepal. In 1991, these three castes constituted 36% of total population in Nepal but occupied 89.2% of positions in the civil service, while Madheshi community accounted for 32% of population but occupied only 8.4% of positions in the civil service. It is interesting to note that in 1971 these three castes had occupied 89% of posts in civil services. Thus, the pattern of civil service had not changed much over the twenty years between 1991 and 1971.

About 81% of the total manpower involved in the 30 multilateral agencies working in Nepal and 61 projects funded by these agencies are from Pahadi community; 14.1% are foreigners and the rest, 5.2%, are Madheshi people. Similarly, just over 8% of the total judges in the country are from Madheshi community, while the rest, 92%, are from Pahadi community. (UNDP [2001]. *Directory of the United Nations and Its related Specialized Agencies in Nepal.*)

Issue # 1 Farmer-friendly/sustainable agricultural policy and program

Sustainable agriculture policy should be followed for farmers and agro-based industries in Madhesh should be promoted by state.

Issue # 2 Access in budget allocation/ budget allocation based on population

National budget should be allocated on the basis of population and system of budget allocation should be localized/ decentralized.

Issue # 3 *Revenue generated from Madhesh should be invested in Madhesh*

Income/ revenue generated from Madhesh should be invested for the development of Madhesh.

Issue # 4 *Proportional representation of Madheshi in I/NGOs and donor agencies*

Development project/ organizations in Madhesh should have proportional representation of Madheshi.

Issue # 5 *Proportional representation of Madheshi in economic institutions/ activities*

Madheshi should have proportional representation in Finance Ministry and other related institutions.

Issue # 6 *Employment opportunities*

There should be either reservation for Madheshi for government employment opportunities or a mechanism for fair process of recruitment process should be established.

Issue # 7 *Land for landless/ scientific distribution of land*

Landless Dalits, Janjati and Muslims should get top priority in getting land. Land of Madhesh should be distributed to landless Madheshi only.

Issue # 8 *Preservation of traditional occupation & skills*

Traditional occupation and skills should be preserved and promoted. Employment opportunities should not affect these skills. For instance, a carpenter should not be obliged to do computer training.

Issue # 9 *Misuse of revenue/ end of corruption*

Misuse of public property and revenue should be stopped and corruption control should be the top priority for political parties and the state.

Issue # 10 *Control over flood/desertification in Madhesh*

Uncontrolled deforestation in Churia range should be controlled and riverbanks in Madhesh should be protected in order to prevent human casualties. Early warning system should be established in flood-prone areas. Similarly, the state should rehabilitate flood-affected Madheshi to safer place.



There should be either reservation for Madheshi in employment opportunities or a mechanism for fair recruitment process is established.

CULTURAL Issues



State should ensure that the citizen feel proud to have their own traditions acknowledged.

Art and culture naturally determine the direction of social change and development. Madhesh boast ancient art and culture like *Mithila*, *Kashi* and *Kaushal*. To adulterate Madhesh's original culture with Nepalese influence, various templates and houses are being built in Chinese pagoda style.

The languages of Nepal are categorized as “hill languages” and “plains languages.” The hill language category includes all the languages spoken as “mother tongue” or “first language” by the hill people. They include Nepali, Newari, Magar etc. Similarly, the plains language category includes languages spoken as mother tongues by plains people living in the Tarai. These include Maithili, Urdu, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, and dialects of these such as Awadhi and the Morang Pradesh dialects, and some languages spoken by relatively few people- languages such as Jhangar, Marwari and Raji. *Maithili* language is the second most used language in the country.

As more than 80 percent of the country's population in Nepal is Hindu, caste as a system of social organization is particular to Hindu societies. Since the hill cultures of Nepal, as well as the plains culture of northern India, are included under this broader cultural umbrella of Hinduism, the social structure of both regional cultures is organized along hierarchical caste lines. The two cultures share interlinking but significantly different caste systems.

Issue # 1 Identification and recognition of language and traditional attire

Different local languages of Madhesh should be identified and recognized. Similarly, Madheshi traditional attire such as *Dhoti*, *Kurta* etc should be recognized as official dress in Madhesh.

Issue # 2 Recognition of Madheshi customs/traditions

Local customs and traditions should be recognized and state should pay attention to its preservation and promotion.

Madheshi Community ('000)

Hindu caste hierarchy	3,127(47%)
Dalits	874 (12%)
Indigenous Janjati	1,940 (28%)
Muslims	936 (13%)

About 96% of country's Madheshi population lives in 20 Terai districts.

Issue # 3 *Promotion of religious/ tourism in Madhesh*

As Madhesh is blessed with religious places and festivals, the state should plan to promote religious tourism in Madhesh.

Issue # 4 *National recognition of Madheshi feast and festival*

Local feasts and festivals of Madhesh should be recognized at national level and the state should pay special attention to the promotion of these feast and festivals.

Issue # 5 *Preservation of Madheshi heritage and monuments*

Heritage and monuments should be preserved by the state and an effort should be made to enlist Madheshi heritage in the World Heritage List.

Issue # 6 *Disrespect for Madheshi luminaries*

Madheshi luminaries should get national and international recognition and their birthdays should be celebrated at national level with various activities. Places of Madhesh should be named after them.

Issue # 7 *Respect for diversity in culture*

As Madhesh consists of various cultures, respect for each and every culture should be paid and the state should maintain the harmony among diverse groups.

Issue # 8 *Protection and promotion of different religions in Madhesh*

Although Hinduism dominates the Madhesh, there should be equal space for all other religions and the state should protect and promote different religions in Madhesh.

Issue # 9 *Research center for sustainable development of local languages, art and culture*

As Madhesh is rich in traditional art and culture, research and educational centre should be established in order to develop the local language, art and culture of Madhesh.

Issue # 10 *National recognition of Madheshi women and their lifestyle*

Madheshi woman and her unique and inspiring lifestyle should be recognized at national level. Their role in culture preservation and promotion should be facilitated and promoted.



Madheshi women have worse status than any other women of Nepal. Our voice must be heard.

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About



SUPPORT NEPAL

SUPPORT Nepal is a not-for-profit, non-government organization serving for a peaceful and independent environment in which effective social, economic and environmental development can occur in Nepal since 1995.

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SG # 1: Human rights/ status of youth: youth will be empowered by being afforded human rights and freedom from all forms of violence and discrimination.

SG # 2: Education: youth, especially young women and girls, disabled and dalits will enjoy enhanced status and will be enabled to achieve their full potential throughout their lifespan.

SG # 3: Economic and social development: youth will live and work in safe and equitable environments with equal opportunities for advancement.

SG # 4: Health: youth will have optimal mental and physical health throughout their life span.

SG # 5: Environment: youth will be equal partners in the process of managing natural resources, maintaining biodiversity and achieving sustainable communities.

SG # 6: National goodwill and understanding: youth will be equal partners in the attainment of national and world peace, tolerance and understanding.

For details;

SUPPORT Nepal

PO Box 41, Janakpurdham, Dhanusha, Nepal

Tel: +977-41-527 204, 521 486

Fax: +977-41-526 036

E-mail: snp@ntc.net.np Web: <http://www.supportnepal.org>



Issues of Madhesh

is the collection of voices of non-political Madheshi leaders of the seven southern Terai districts of Nepal; Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rauthat, Bara and Parsa.

It highlights the political, social, economic and cultural issues of Madhesh.